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Matthias Brütsch

Complex Narration in Film: Reflections on the Interplay of Deception, Distancing and Empuzzlement

1 Introduction

Complex narrative structures are not new to the history of film, but they have particularly flourished during the past twenty-five years, in independent and mainstream productions alike. That various labels have been found to describe the trend away from unambiguous, linear narrative and reliable, predictable narration – among them ‘mind benders’ (Johnson 2005), ‘offbeat storytelling’ (Bordwell 2006), ‘puzzle films’ (Panek 2006, Buckland 2009), ‘the new disorder’ (Denby 2007), ‘modular narratives’ (Cameron 2008), ‘mind-game films’ (Elsaesser 2009), ‘narrative mazes’ (Eckel et al. 2013) – should not be allowed to obscure the heterogeneity of the works concerned. The scheme presented by Sabine Schlickers and Vera Toro in the introduction to this volume brings home the diversity of the narrative procedures used to generate such complexity.

My intention here is to bring a modicum of order to this ‘new disorder’. I work on the assumption that – because of mutual conditioning and potential incompatibility – not all the strategies listed by Schlickers and Toro will be equally open to combination. As an examination of every possible permutation would exceed the scope of this essay, I shall concentrate on the question how various forms of audience deception interact with other procedures. The following scheme – adapted from Schlickers and Toro – will serve as a starting point:

- 1) **deception** with surprise twist / resolution
- 2) **distancing** (metafiction / narrative paradox)
- 3) **empuzzlement**
 - a) **confusion** (incoherency / contradiction)
 - b) **destabilization** (ambiguity / the fantastic)
 - c) **challenge** (inverse / multilinear / multiperspective / circular / fragmentary narrative).

While my first heading is unchanged from Schlickers and Toro, the second is ‘distancing’ rather than ‘paradox’; for, as I see it, all narrative paradoxes are

self-reflexive, but not all metafiction is paradoxical.¹ For this reason I have positioned paradox on a hierarchically lower plane. It should also be noted that the distinctions between my three sub-categories of empuzzlement – confusion, destabilization and challenge – are no more clear-cut than the labels attached to them suggest; for incoherency is both confusing and challenging, and fragmentary narration may also confuse. I hope, however, that the logic of these divisions will become apparent in the course of my analysis.

There are, then, four possible combinations involving strategies of deception; these will be taken here in slightly altered sequence: 1. Deception and confusion; 2. Deception and destabilization; 3. Deception and distancing; 4. Deception and challenge. The analysis will be followed by a consideration of the levels of perturbation generated by these combinations, and of the correlative issue of the relationship between complexity and perturbation.

However, before I start on my first point, I would like to make a brief observation on unreliable narration and deception. It is often forgotten in film studies that the concept of unreliable narrator was originally developed by Wayne Booth (1983 [1961], 155–165) for a narrative situation entailing self-deception on the part of the narrator rather than deception of the reader. What the concept highlighted was the latter's position of distant, ironic complicity with the (implied) author. In works like Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) or Ian McEwan's short story "Dead as they Come" (1978) it is not the reader but the narrator who reveals himself as deceived. The case has been quite different in film studies for the past twenty years or so, when examples commonly bracketed by the concept of 'unreliable narration' – movies like *The Sixth Sense* (USA 1999) or *Fight Club* (USA 1999) – have foregrounded the deception of the viewer. It is this narrative strategy I am referring to when I speak of unreliable narration in this article, with all the false leads and unexpected twists such films exhibit.²

1 A film-in-film, for example, is only paradoxical when the boundary between the two levels is transgressed (cf. Brütsch 2008).

2 For a more detailed discussion of this distinction cf. Brütsch (2014). For large-scale deceptions, usually called 'falsche Fährte' in German-language publications on unreliable narration, I use the term 'false lead' here instead of 'red herring', since the latter is sometimes reserved for purely short-term distractions from the actual storyline, such as the money theft in *Psycho* (USA 1960).

2 Deception and confusion

Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (Spain/France/Italy 1997) is a prime example of the interplay of deception and confusion. It is the story of a well-off, attractive young man, César, who falls in love with Sofia, the girl who accompanies his best friend to his birthday party. He spends the night with her, but next morning his jealous ex-girlfriend Nuria is lying in wait, and she persuades him to go with her for a final sexual fling at her place. On their way there she drives intentionally into a wall. César survives the 'accident', but his face is so badly maimed that the surgeons can't and Sofia won't do anything more for him. His misery is complete when, on a club evening with his friend and Sofia, he sees them making out, and they finally leave him there alone. Next morning, however, Sofia suddenly stands before him, apologizes and kisses him. Shortly afterward, new surgical techniques restore his face to its pristine beauty and the world seems whole again. But not for long; strange things happen. One night César finds Nuria instead of Sofia next to him in bed, and both his friend and the police confirm that the woman he thinks is Nuria is in fact his girlfriend and the woman who died in the car crash was Sofia. Yet only a little later Sofia turns up at his apartment. César embraces her blissfully and they make love, but in the very act of doing so he realizes that the woman beneath him is Nuria. In despair, he grabs a pillow and presses it over her face until she stops breathing. Hurriedly leaving Sofia's apartment, he catches sight of his face in the mirror and realizes with horror that the disfigurement has returned.

After this, César lands in a secure psychiatric institution, where – after some initial reluctance – he confides in a psychologist. These sessions evoke vague memories and dream images of a firm called Life Extension whose business, it turns out, is to freeze its clients after death until technology has reached a point where they can be reanimated. Tailored to individual wishes, their posthumous second life in virtual reality will knit seamlessly onto the first. It is on entering a branch of this company that César finally realizes he is himself a customer of Life Extension. From the point of Sofia's return onward, all his experiences have been virtual and imaginary.

The film then, works with a special form of 'wake-up' twist that in Bernd Leiendecker's system (2015) has a category of its own: that of 'retroactively marked virtual reality'. Further examples of this type can be found in *Total Recall* (USA 1990), *The Matrix* (USA 1999), *The Thirteenth Floor* (USA/Germany 1999), *eXistenZ* (UK/Canada 1999) and *Vanilla Sky* (USA 2001, a remake of *Abre los ojos*). The most striking feature of *Abre los ojos* is undoubtedly the clever audience-deception maintained throughout most of the film. What interests me in

particular, however, is the specific modes of destabilization and confusion practiced upon the viewer, and their relations to the overall strategy of deception.

First of all, I must correct the impression I have given in my summary account that César's story is told in linear fashion. That is not so. The account is retrospective: the psychotherapy sessions appear as present reality, and César himself is the homodiegetic narrator of all prior events. Established film-narrative technique is used here, with an initial voiceover giving way to conventional audiovisual presentation. Accordingly, the basic flashback structure has two narrative as well as time levels, and two levels of reality are also introduced from the start: César relates not only his waking (or supposed waking) experiences, but also those of his dreams. It is here that an initial strategy of destabilization appears, for repeatedly (and from the beginning of the film) scenes first taken to be real turn out to be dream sequences. That in itself is nothing new, but the game *Abre los ojos* plays with the viewer is particularly subtle, for the film opens with a special form of retroactively marked dream, the 'false awakening', and it is only when this opening scene returns in exactly the same form that a 'true awakening' follows.³

In the car-crash sequence the insecurity about the status of reality is enhanced by a series of inversions that present the events within the space of a few minutes first as real, then as dreamed, and finally again as real. In the second half of the film unmarked dream sequences are no longer just isolated effects: they are part of a far wider strategy of confusion to be described below. In a certain sense these individual deceptions anticipate the overriding deception, without, however, derogating from its effect, for as soon as the action returns to the ostensibly safe ground of waking life they are consigned to the realm of the unreal.

This changes from the moment when the sea-change in César's life brings inexplicable happenings: Sofía's replacement by Nuria, the reversion of his face to its injured state, the word-perfect repetition by others of sentences he once spoke himself, or the strange event in a crowded bar when his scarcely audible wish for quiet brings immediate silence and everyone stares at him. At this point in the film the viewer is not just momentarily disturbed by the unstable 'reality status' of individual events, but profoundly confused by mounting incoherencies, contradictions, uncanny repetitions and the inexplicable behavior of entire groups.

Unlike such films as *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (France/Italy 1960), *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie*, (France 1972) or *Eraserhead* (USA 1978), *Abre*

3 On the retroactive marking of dream sequences cf. Brütsch (2011, 182–211).

los ojos is not so constructed that after a while we simply accept such abnormalities without looking for a plausible explanation within their fictional world. With a murder trial pending, César's conversations with the psychologist and the ensuing flashbacks, the film assumes the structure of a detective story and the viewer adopts the perspective of its characters in their quest to unravel the mystery (cf. Ardid 2004, 133). Several solutions current in the practice of unreliable narration present themselves as equally possible (cf. Strank 2014, 173): César, for instance, has quarreled with his business partners, who may have entered into a conspiracy with his jealous ex-lover, potentially leading to a so-called 'set-up twist'; or the crash has left psychological as well as physical scars and César is under strong medication which, along with the drugs the psychologist suspects him of taking, could cause delusions and hallucinations – a solution with a 'perceptual twist'; or, given that several supposedly 'real' events turned out to be dream-products, and the psychologist explicitly tells him that phenomena like Sofia's transformation into Nuria are typical of dreams, César may have dreamed everything – a typical 'wake-up twist'. Finally, in view of the unexpected second round of surgery – implemented with futuristic looking apparatus – and César's remark that it 'felt like being in a science fiction film', the film might simply end with a turn to the fantastic. The feverish search for a solution underlines the fact that we, as viewers of *Abre los ojos*, are not entirely unprepared: we realize that something is strange and that we lack important information. It is not, then, the moment of resolution itself that comes as a surprise, but the form it takes: neither conspiracy, delusion nor dream in the strict sense, it consists rather of conscious self-deception brought about through the medium of neurally induced virtual reality.

The twist reveals a yet more complex structure behind the already complex dual levels of narrative, time, and reality; for we are now confronted with a further time level (the actual present of 2045) and two more levels of reality (virtual reality and the dreams experienced in that dimension). The multiple levels are carefully interwoven inasmuch as actual dreams anticipate virtual reality, while their virtual counterparts refer back to real but forgotten events.

The interplay of deception, destabilization and confusion in *Abre los ojos* looks, then, something like in Fig. 1:

| Beginning | Middle | End |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| destabilization | confusion / puzzle | resolution |
| (deception) | (deception) | deception revealed |

Fig. 1: Deception, destabilization and confusion in *Abre los ojos*

3 Puzzle with surprising solution versus apparent coherence as false lead

Similar examples of films combining deception and confusion are *Angel Heart* (USA 1987), *The Matrix* (USA 1999), *Identity* (USA 2003), *El maquinista* (Spain 2004) and *Stay* (USA 2005). These do not, however, represent the filmic norm of unreliable narration, as is evident from the far larger number of works in which the resolution is not to the same extent anticipated by prior confusion. Among these are:

The Avenging Conscience (USA 1914)
Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari (Germany 1919)
Dans la nuit (France 1929)
The Woman in the Window (USA 1944)
The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry (USA 1945)
Strange Impersonation (USA 1946)
La rivière du hibou (France 1962)
The Usual Suspects (USA 1995)
Fight Club (USA 1999)
The Sixth Sense (USA 1999)
A Beautiful Mind (USA 2001)
Anger Management (USA 2002)
Swimming Pool (France/UK 2003)
Shutter Island (USA 2010)

The ostensibly coherent world of these films lulls the audience into a false sense of security from which the awakening is all the ruder: a twist without forewarning is, after all, more disturbing than one for which the ground has been prepared, however confusingly. In the categories of unreliable narration in film proposed so far (notably by Strank 2014 and Leiendecker 2015), this distinction is not mentioned, and the following table (Fig. 2) shows that it cuts across those already established divisions:

| | Perceptual twist / split personality / imaginary friends | Wake-up twist / retroactively marked virtual reality | Deathbed fantasy / unconscious death |
|--------------------------------|--|--|---|
| With prior confusion | <i>Angel Heart, Identity, El maquinista</i> | <i>Abre los ojos, The Matrix</i> | <i>Stay</i> |
| Without prior confusion | <i>Fight Club, A Beautiful Mind, Shutter Island</i> | <i>The Thirteenth Floor</i> | <i>La rivière du hibou, The Sixth Sense</i> |

Fig. 2: Categories of unreliable narration

In his book about joke punch-lines and short story resolutions, Peter Wenzel (1989) proposes a similar distinction. Differentiating between the making and breaking of a frame of reference, he observes how in the first instance a few (contradictory) hints are given of the resolution, so recipients are confused, and when the punch-line comes it takes an unexpected form. In the second instance, expectations of a certain kind are consistently built up and recipients – who are not in this case confused – are taken all the more aback by the divergent resolution.

Looking at deceptions that span a whole film, they generally represent either one or the other of these two variants. There are, however, a few films – like *Identity* by James Mangold (USA 2003) – that combine both forms. *Identity* sets up two plotlines: on the one hand a judicial hearing for a stay of execution in which a condemned man's psychiatrist seeks to convince the judge that his patient is not capable of criminal responsibility; on the other the involuntary gathering in an isolated motel during a storm of a group of people seeking shelter, including a prisoner accompanied by a police officer. The relation between these two plotlines is initially unclear: apart from the geographical and temporal proximity suggested by the storm they seem entirely unconnected. But this part of the puzzle soon fades into the background, when events in the motel become chaotic: a body is found, the prisoner is missing, more deaths follow, among them the prisoner's, and the plot develops into a whodunit in the style of Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*.⁴ Nor is that all, for events soon take an unreal turn. First, on each corpse – not only the murder victims but also those who apparently died accidental deaths – a numbered room-key is found. Secondly, it seems impossible to leave the neighborhood of the motel: moving in a straight line away from it, the prisoner soon comes face to face with it again. Thirdly,

⁴ First published as *Ten Little Niggers* (1939).

the motel survivors discover that they were all born on the same day, which appears equally improbable.

As in *Abre los ojos*, these confusing facts lead to wild speculation among film characters and viewers alike. Here, too, there is a surprising twist, for the characters in the motel, it transpires, are all projections of Malcolm's psyche. He – the murderer in the other plotline – suffers from dissociative identity disorder, and the serial elimination of the people in the motel marks successive therapeutic steps in the re-establishment of his fragmented personality. It becomes clear during the judicial hearing that the death sentence can only be commuted if he succeeds in eliminating the persona that was responsible for the killings.

Meanwhile, back in the motel plot, it is now clear that we are witnessing the symbolic expression of an inner struggle whose outcome will decide Malcolm's fate. In this second part of the movie the source of tension has accordingly shifted. Nevertheless, at the (residual) 'whodunit' level it soon appears that the supposed police officer is the culprit, for he is also a jailbird, and the question now turns on whether the others will be able to eliminate him. The concluding showdown stages their success, the skies clear and Paris, the 'final girl', leaves the motel. The frame plot steers toward a similar happy ending when Malcolm's death sentence is quashed in favor of further therapy.

At this point, however, with no forewarning, the second twist occurs: Paris suddenly finds herself face-to-face with a small boy who was part of the group all along, but – given his minor, passive role – an entirely unnoticed part. A flashback tutorial tells us, however, that it was he who committed the murders and arranged the accidents – a sort of 'dog-as-mastermind' touch. The happy ending is finally reversed when the boy kills Paris – which means that evil once again gains the upper hand in Malcolm's psyche and he strangles his psychologist.

What *Identity* offers us, then, is first a deception with prior warning, then one without: a conclusion that catches the viewer entirely unawares. The concept of the 'false lead', often used indiscriminately for all forms of unreliable narration, only seems properly applicable to this second kind of deception.

4 Deception and ambiguity

The second complex narrative structure to be examined here is the combination of deception with ambiguity.⁵ So far as the second of these concepts is con-

5 On the relation of ambiguity to unreliable narration in Booth's sense cf. Brüttsch 2015.

cerned, the sort of ambiguity that corresponds with Todorov's concept of the fantastic is particularly interesting. Todorov refers here to works that offer both a natural and a supernatural explanation for the unusual events they portray, but delay any decision about which it is to be – or, in the case of the 'pure fantastic', block such a decision altogether (cf. Todorov 1970). In her study of the fantastic in film, Claudia Pinkas classifies *Abre los ojos* as "an essentially ambiguous and fantastical film" (2010, 271) on the grounds that, alongside rational explanations, the possibility of a supernatural solution gradually gains prominence. I am not, however, wholly convinced by this argument, for although the science-fiction dimension is already present under the surface quite early in the film, it remains largely hidden and is only mentioned en passant. But to meet Todorov's criterion of vacillation, both options, natural and supernatural, must be equally and convincingly present throughout most of the work. This is the case – including literary as well as filmic texts – in *La Vénus d'Ille* (Prosper Mérimée 1837); *The Turn of the Screw* (Henry James 1898); *Rosemary's Baby* (Ira Levin 1967 / Roman Polanski, USA 1968); *The Green Man* (Kingsley Amis 1969); *El laberinto del fauno* (Spain/Mexico 2006); and *The Blair Witch Project* (USA 1999). In *Abre los ojos* and *Identity*, on the other hand, we are left for a long time in the dark, and instead of two equally convincing solutions we are offered a series of not-very-convincing ones. The question here is not: Is it A or B? The question is: Is it A, or B, or C, or D or what?

If, as is generally the case with the fantastic, the range of possible explanations is firmly restricted and clear from early on, there is no room for either deception or twist; for neither coming down for one or the other variant, nor remaining undecided, involves any element of surprise. Nevertheless, that Todorov's fantastic is not entirely incompatible with deception is evident from my third example, *Carnival of Souls* (Herk Harvey, USA 1962)⁶, whose protagonist, Mary, is repeatedly haunted by ghostly apparitions. Whether these are figments of her imagination or really exist in the fictional world of the film remains open until almost the end. For the first possibility speaks the fact that Mary is suffering psychologically from the aftermath of a serious road accident; for the second, that the apparitions are also visible outside Mary's perceptual frame. The ostensible climax of the film has her pursued, and eventually caught, by a whole horde of the undead; and when she is missing next morning and the police find marks of the pursuit in the sand, we tend to the conclusion that these happenings are really supernatural. But the next moment returns us abruptly to the scene of the accident, and the retrieval of the wrecked automobile with her body

6 I am grateful to Matías Martínez for pointing this film out to me.

confirms that not only the ghosts but the whole series of events after the accident stem from Mary’s dying vision. This is an instance of Strank’s final twist category of ‘deathbed fantasy’ (2014, 177), which counts among its illustrious forebears Ambrose Bierce’s short story *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* (1890) and Robert Enrico’s 1962 film of the same name.

Carnival of Souls, then, has the typical either-or structure of fantastic narrative, and seems to choose one of these alternatives; but right at the end it rejects both in favor of a third. This can be presented schematically as follows in Fig. 3:

| Beginning and middle | Apparent ending | Actual ending |
|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| A or B? | B | C |
| ambivalence | apparent decision | surprise |
| (deception) | (deception) | deception revealed |

Fig. 3: The dynamics of ambivalence and deception in *Carnival of Souls*

The Argentine caper movie *Nueve reinas* (Argentina 2000) follows a similar model, albeit without any supernatural elements. Here, too, a central question remains unanswered until almost the end: Does Marcos really intend to involve Juan in the job with the fake postage stamps, or is he only interested in relieving him of money? Each answer is equally probable and, as with the fantastic, we tend to swing from one to the other, until first the latter and then the former variant seems to be confirmed. Then, in a final twist, a third version appears that we had at no point considered: right from the beginning it was Juan who hoodwinked Marcos, and the entire action centering on the fake stamps was staged by him and his gang. Both *Carnival of Souls* and *Nueve reinas* show that undecidability between two variant interpretations can only be combined with sustained, film-long deception if it plays a subordinate role and the binary structure is resolved in a final twist.

5 Deception and distancing

The third combination strategy of interest here is that between deception and metafiction. Films that take the audience on a false trail, or – like *Abre los ojos* and *Identity* – fascinate them with a game of mysterious confusion, generally rely on narrative techniques that foster immersion in the events on screen, whereas self-reflexive narratives that highlight the artificial quality of fiction generally function by creating distance. Metafiction and deception, therefore, are in

principle poor bedfellows. Conversely, however, the post factum laying bare of a feint through a surprise twist evokes not only what Ed Tan (1996) has called ‘fiction emotion’ but also, and necessarily, ‘artefact emotion’. The reconstruction of an alternative plotline – let alone a different world-picture – triggered by a final revelation, inevitably contains a self-reflexive moment. Moreover, films that play with levels of reality often reveal a special form of metafictionality *after* the twist. *Abre los ojos* and *Identity* are good examples of this: the concluding scene on the roof of the building in the former and the showdown with the supposed killer in the latter eminently reflect the underlying cinema situation. Both films have just demonstrated that all the figures with which the protagonist interacts are purely imaginary. Nevertheless, the plot marches bravely on, tension and audience response included, graphically illustrating the power of fiction and with it the relation of audience to film characters.

While every twist incorporates a metafictional dimension, some twists underline even more strongly the quality of the work-as-artefact: consider for a moment the false leads and strange happenings *resolved* by narrative paradox. A well-known example is Julio Cortázar’s short story *Continuidad de los parques* (1964), in which the protagonist is assaulted by a figure from the novel he is reading. The TV crime movie *Wer bin ich?* (Germany 2015, cf. Schlickers and Toro’s introduction to this volume) resolves its main plot with a similar – and no less surprising – metalepsis in which not the actor (Ulrich Tukur) but the fictional Inspector Murot whom he plays (i.e. a character from the film-within-the-film) is responsible for the death of the unit manager, which occurs under mysterious circumstances during the shoot. Tex Avery’s animation film *Who killed who?* (USA 1943) stages a transgression in the opposite direction when it finally reveals that the director – who introduces the film – is himself the wanted murderer in its diegetic world. Again, the seemingly inexplicable happenings of the Norwegian film *Sofies Verden* (*Sophie’s World*, Norway/Sweden 1999) are resolved when the main character is revealed as a figure from a novel. Paradoxical turns of this sort are relatively rare, but they indicate that metalepsis and unexpected twists are a better match than metalepsis and preceding deception strategies. There is, however, yet another case in which the twist does not arise from but itself resolves a narrative paradox, and in doing so naturalizes it.

This brings me to my fourth and final example, the Swedish short film *Dockpojken* (*Puppet Boy*, 2008). Presented as the portrait of an artist – an animation film-maker – it initially plays with the typical pseudo-documentary ambivalence between fact and fiction. This soon gives way, however, to the conviction that we are watching a fictional parody of the exaggerated identification some artists cultivate with their creations. For a TV documentary, the protagonist Johannes dons a man-size costume modeled on his own animation puppet. After a disagree-

ment with the film crew about a broken camera lens, they go off with Johannes' computer, leaving him behind in his puppet costume, which he can only shed with outside help. Hoping a passer-by might help, he runs out onto the street, but when a young man does try to assist, it turns out that the costume has no zip fastener. When the helper then pulls on the ears in the attempt to free Johannes' head, he yells out in pain. Here, at the climax of the parody, it turns out that the film-maker has himself become the puppet: identification has turned into transformation. The paradoxical – and at the same time fantastical – transgression is, however, reversed when the man-sized figure throws himself in a tantrum on the ground and the scene cuts to the small modeling-clay figure from the animation film that just at that moment wakes, bathed in sweat, from a nightmare. *Puppet Boy* thus ends in the metafictional world without returning to the level of the framing plot – a parody of the wake-up twist, which turns the established hierarchy of realities upside down. In a certain sense, these are all now reduced to the same level, for the shooting, the TV documentary, and Johannes' paradoxical metamorphosis are all revealed as dreams of a figure from the puzzle's inner core: the diegetic world of the animation film-within-the-film.

6 Deception and challenge

Contradictions and ambiguities are not alone in confronting the viewer with puzzles and cognitive challenges: procedures like inverse, multilinear, multiperspective, circular and fragmentary narration also do this, but space allows here only a brief consideration of the relation of some of these to deception. Deception itself, I would argue, presupposes a certain goal-orientation: meandering narratives like that of *Two for the Road* (UK 1967) or *Je t'aime, je t'aime* (France 1968), with their fragmented, achronological technique, are not ideal for establishing false leads. That deception cannot be entirely precluded is evident, however – at least in germ – from a film like *Bad Timing* (UK 1980), which is no less fragmented and achronological than the two just mentioned. But here the fragments are so arranged that the question as to what happened in the fateful night of Milena's attempted suicide moves increasingly to center stage;⁷ and although deception of the viewer is not in this case the film's main concern – the final resolution is not entirely surprising and is not presented as assured knowledge – the focus on a single dramatic issue and its putative solution indicate that strat-

7 Cf. Jeff Thoss's analysis of *Bad Timing* in this volume.

egies of deception are also in principle possible in highly fragmented, achronologically narrated films.

Multilinear and/or multiperspective narratives can also surprise the viewer, often by the unexpected convergence of plotlines, for example through gradual clarification of their chronology – as in *11:14* (USA/Canada 2003), *Before the Rain*, (UK/France/Macedonia 1994), or *Babel* (USA/Mexico/France 2006). However, deception as the focal point of the narrative is something of an exception in multiperspective films: as a rule, false leads require straight-line structures that provide a sense of interpretive security, while the presentation of events in multiple variants and/or perspectives – as in *Rashômon* (Japan 1950) or *Mr. Nobody* (Belgium/Germany/Canada/France 2009)⁸ undermines their credibility early on. *À la folie, pas du tout* (France 2002), a film that unmasks its protagonist's love affair the second time round as a delusion, is an exception to this rule. Significantly, however, it has only two perspectives and the deception is already revealed at the changeover from one to the other in the middle of the film.

Goal orientation is also present in reverse-chronology films, the only difference being that it runs backward⁹ – a technique that foregrounds the chain of events and the interplay of cause and effect and automatically lays special emphasis on the ending. In order not to overly strain the reconstruction of events, films of this kind often have only one spatiotemporal universe, one plotline and one main character (or couple). In principle, this opens the way for wide-scale deception maneuvers, and Christopher Nolan's *Memento* (USA 2000), for example, is paradigmatic not only for inverse but also for unreliable narration. In one particularly interesting respect *Memento* approximates the structure of *Carnival of Souls* and *Nueve reinas*, for here, too, the real twist – that Leonard willfully deceives himself all along – comes only after the apparent climax of Jimmy's murder. The special appeal of the combination between inverse and unreliable narration is that the moment of truth at the beginning of the story lies at the end of the film; hence neither a flashback tutorial nor a mental rerun is necessary.

7 Degrees of perturbation

We have seen that strategies of deception can be combined in various ways with confusion, ambiguity, narrative paradox and other forms of unconventional nar-

⁸ Cf. also the article by Dominik Orth in this volume.

⁹ On inverse narration cf. Brüttsch (2013).

ration. Before I come to the question how perturbing these various combinations are, I should like to comment briefly on the classification of complex (i.e. *more* complex than classical Hollywood) film narratives advanced by various authors. Ramírez Berg (2006), for example, proposes twelve categories: ensemble / parallel / multiple personality / daisy chain / backwards / repeated action / repeated event / hub and spoke / jumbled / subjective / existential / metanarrative plot.¹⁰ Typologies of this kind are based on distinctions in the discursive structure of the narrative – i.e. they are concerned with the relation between narration and story. My own distinction between forms of deception, confusion, destabilization, distancing, and challenge¹¹ seeks, on the other hand, to distinguish between narrative strategies that have a particular impact on the viewer and trigger specific processes of reception – i.e. strategies concerned more directly with the relation between narration and viewer.¹² The concept of perturbatory narration, which implies both cognitive and psychological aspects – disturbance of the process of understanding / emotional disturbance of the viewer – is also concerned with this relation. The degree of perturbation evoked by a narration can, therefore, be more readily measured on the basis of the categories I have suggested than on that of narrative categories, such as those proposed by Ramírez Berg, that may all be more or less disturbing.

If one takes as the criterion of perturbation a (temporary or permanent) lack of cognitive control on the part of the viewer (due to incoherency and reconstructive impenetrability of the narrative), it follows that perturbation arising from a deception that is eventually resolved can only ever be temporary. If confusion is sown before the twist, the perturbatory phase may be quite long; false leads established without such confusion, on the other hand, only perturb at the moment of resolution, but do so all the more violently. The effect is, nevertheless, only genuinely sustained if the apparent resolution is followed by further twists or incoherencies that again undermine the viewer's grasp of the situation – as in *eXistenZ* (UK/Canada 1999), *Audition* (Japan/South Korea 1999) or *American Psycho* (USA/Canada 2000) – or if a potential reinterpretation is seen to be only one

10 Similar typologies can be found e.g. in Bildhauer (2007), Krützen (2010) and Eckel (2012).

11 As a generic term for remaining forms of disturbing impact not covered by the other terms, 'challenge' is not always clearly distinguishable from parallel categories (cf. the introduction to this article).

12 Miklós Kiss has with justification observed that traditional classifications like that of Ramírez "all fail to scrutinise the recognised complexity in its core function within the viewing experience. Narrative complexity's essence is not an abstract structure mapped by narratologists' descriptive methods, but a sensed confusion explained by *cognitive poetics*" (2013, 241, original emphasis).

of several possibilities, none of which takes account of every aspect, as in the dream resolution of *Mulholland Drive* (USA/France 2001). Films like *Abre los ojos* or *Identity* are structurally complex and contain perturbing elements, but they stop short of preventing a coherent reconstruction of the story beyond the end of the film.¹³ This seems to me typical of the vast majority of so-called ‘mind-bender’, ‘mind-game’ or ‘puzzle’ films of the past few decades – and is probably the reason why they have been able to make it out of the independent and arthouse niche into the mainstream.

Films whose incoherencies and contradictions remain utterly insoluble are relatively rare. Here, too, I would make a distinction: in variants like *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* or *Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie* (France 1972) we quickly learn to accept the strange events as a game that cannot be decoded conventionally but must be interpreted allegorically. But in others, like *Lost Highway* (France/USA 1996), *Mulholland Drive*, *Chasing Sleep* (Canada/USA/France 2000) or *Triangle* (GB/Australia 2005), the contradictions are so calculated as to tease the viewer inexorably and beyond the end of the film into trying to make sense of its events along rational lines.¹⁴ These ‘riddle films’ (Kiss) are a good deal more perturbing than any of those analyzed above: they succeed in challenging, frustrating and at the same time fascinating the viewer without offering either a satisfactory solution or an allegorical escape route.¹⁵ So far as the large-scale forms of deception are concerned on which this article has focused, the fact remains that they do not find fertile ground in riddle films. Deception works better with a plot that only temporarily appears incoherent – or other than it actually is.

Filmography

11:14. Directed by Greg Marcks. 2003. USA/Canada: Phoenix Media, 2011. DVD.

Abre los ojos (*Open Your Eyes*). Directed by Alejandro Amenábar. 1997. Spain/France/Italy: Artisan Home Entertainment, 2001. DVD.

¹³ *Abre los ojos* does leave some room for interpretation at the end, since the final awakening refers back to the first two scenes, thus implying the possibility of a time loop or an even more extensive dream structure (cf. Strank 2014, 173–174). A coherent and conclusive reading, as I have suggested, is nevertheless possible and, in my opinion, more satisfactory.

¹⁴ Cf. Kiss (2013, 250–251).

¹⁵ Kiss justifiably observes of Buckland's anthology that it is problematic to put riddle films in the same category as works that only tentatively or temporarily stage confusing incoherencies and contradictions.

- A Beautiful Mind*. Directed by Ron Howard. 2001. USA: DreamWorks Home Entertainment, 2006. DVD.
- À la folie, pas du tout*. Directed by Laetitia Colombani. 2002. France: Optimum Releasing, 2002. DVD.
- American Psycho*. Directed by Mary Harron. 2000. USA/Canada: Concorde Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD.
- Angel Heart*. Directed by Alan Parker. 1987. USA: Live Entertainment, 1998. DVD.
- Anger Management*. Directed by Peter Segal. 2002. USA: Video Library of the Film Studies Department of the University of Zurich, 2007. DVD.
- Audition*. Directed by Takashi Miike. 1999. Japan/South Korea: Xenix Film [year not indicated]. DVD
- Babel*. Directed by Alejandro González Iñárritu. 2006: USA/Mexico/France: Paramount Pictures, 2007. DVD.
- Bad Timing*. Directed by Nicolas Roeg. 1980. UK: The Criterion Collection, 2005. DVD.
- Before the Rain*. Directed by Milcho Manchevski. 1994. UK/France/Macedonia: The Criterion Collection, 2008. DVD.
- Carnival of Souls*. Directed by Herk Harvey. 1962. USA: The Criterion Collection, 2000. DVD.
- Chasing Sleep*. Directed by Michael Walker. 2000. Canada/USA/France: Kinowelt Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.
- Dans la nuit*. Directed by Charles Vanel. 1929. France: Video Library of the Film Studies Department of the University of Zurich, 2001. VHS.
- Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*. Directed by Robert Wiene. 1919. Germany: Universum Film, 2014. DVD.
- Dockpojken (Puppet Boy)*. Directed by Johannes Nyholm. 2008. Sweden: Archive of the International Short Film Festival Winterthur, 2009. DVD.
- El laberinto del fauno*. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. 2006. Spain/Mexico: Senator Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.
- El maquinista*. Directed by Brad Anderson. 2004. Spain: Tartan Video, 2005. DVD.
- Eraserhead*. Directed by David Lynch. 1978. USA: The Criterion Collection, 2014. DVD.
- eXistenZ*. Directed by David Cronenberg. 1999. UK/Canada: Alliance Atlantis [no year indicated]. DVD.
- Fight Club*. Directed by David Fincher. 1999. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2000. DVD.
- Identity*. Directed by James Mangold. 2003. USA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.
- Je t'aime, je t'aime*. Directed by Alain Resnais. 1968. France: Kino Lorber, 2015. DVD.
- L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. Directed by Alain Resnais. 1960: France/Italy. Kinowelt Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.
- La rivière du hibou (aka An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge)*. Directed by Robert Enrico. 1962. France: Monterey Media, 2004. DVD.
- Le charme discret de la bourgeoisie*. Directed by Luis Buñuel. 1972. France: The Criterion Collection, 2000. DVD.
- Lost Highway*. Directed by David Lynch. 1996. France/USA: Universum Film, 2002. DVD.
- Memento*. Directed by Christopher Nolan. 2000. USA: Columbia TriStar Home Entertainment, 2002. DVD.

- Mr. Nobody*. Directed by Jaco Van Dormael. 2009. Belgium/Germany/Canada/France: Concorde Home Entertainment, 2011. DVD.
- Mulholland Drive*. Directed by David Lynch. 2001. USA/France: The Criterion Collection, 2015. DVD.
- Nueve reinas*. Directed by Fabián Bielinsky. 2000. Argentina: Kinowelt Home Entertainment, 2003. DVD.
- Psycho*. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. 1960. USA: Universal Pictures, 2007. DVD.
- Rashômon*. Directed by Akira Kurosawa. 1950. Japan: The Criterion Collection, 2002. DVD.
- Rosemary's Baby*. Directed by Roman Polanski. 1968. USA: The Criterion Collection, 2012. DVD.
- Shutter Island*. Directed by Martin Scorsese. 2010. USA: Concorde Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.
- Sofies Verden (Sophie's World)*. Directed by Erik Gustavson. 1999. Norway/Sweden: SF Norge [no year indicated]. DVD.
- Strange Impersonation*. Directed by Anthony Mann. 1946. USA: Kino International, 2000. DVD.
- Swimming Pool*. Directed by François Ozon. 2003. France/UK: Universal Studios, 2003. DVD.
- Tatort: Wer bin ich?* Directed by Bastian Günther. 2015. Germany: Video Library of the Film Studies Department of the University of Zurich, 2016. DVD.
- The Avenging Conscience or "Thou Shalt Not Kill"*. Directed by David Wark Griffith. 1914. USA: Kino International, 2008. DVD.
- The Blair Witch Project*. Directed by Daniel Myrick/Eduardo Sanchez. 1999. USA: Artisan Home Entertainment, 1999. DVD.
- The Matrix*. Directed by Andy Wachowski/Lana Wachowski. 1999. USA: Warner Home Video, 1999. DVD.
- The Sixth Sense*. Directed by M. Night Shyamalan. 1999. USA: Buena Vista Home Entertainment [no year indicated]. DVD.
- The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry*. Directed by Robert Siodmak. 1945. USA: Suevia Films [no year indicated]. DVD.
- The Thirteenth Floor*. Directed by Josef Rusnak. 1999. USA/Germany: Columbia TriStar Home Video, 1999. DVD.
- The Usual Suspects*. Directed by Bryan Singer. 1995. USA: MGM Home Entertainment, 1999. DVD.
- The Woman in the Window*. Directed by Fritz Lang. 1944. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.
- Total Recall*. Directed by Paul Verhoeven. 1990. USA: Artisan Entertainment, 1998. DVD.
- Triangle*. Directed by Christopher Smith. 2005. GB/Australia: Elite Film, 2012. DVD.
- Two for the Road*. Directed by Stanley Donen. 1967. UK: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005. DVD.
- Vanilla Sky*. Directed by Cameron Crowe. 2001. USA: Paramount Pictures, 2002. DVD.
- Who killed who?* Directed by Tex Avery. 1943. USA: Turner Entertainment, Warner Bros. Entertainment, 2010. DVD.

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